

1am
Egypt

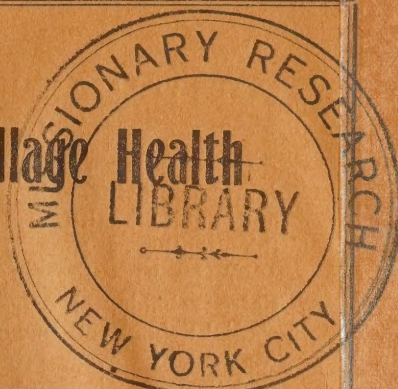
146

A Student Contest to Promote Village Health

by

WENDELL CLELAND

Director, Division of Extension.



January, 1928

The American University at Cairo

Cairo, Egypt

THE WRITER received his degree of B.A. from Westminster College (Penna.) in 1909 and his M.A. from Princeton University in 1914. In 1917 he came to Egypt in advance of the founding of the American University at Cairo and for a year and a half participated in war relief work in Palestine and Syria. In 1923 while acting as teacher and bursar, he was appointed to organize the Division of Extension, in which work he is now engaged.

EGYPTIAN HEALTH.—Allah has been very merciful towards Egypt; a benevolent sun beams down its enlivening, purifying rays; a vast, clean desert bounds on three sides and a sea on the fourth, giving protection from enemies and a fresh, dry, north breeze fifty weeks of the year; the rich valley lands, renewed constantly by the mighty Nile through irrigation, produce three crops every fifteen months; a dense population of industrious people reap the blessings. So bounteous has Nature been that existence is not primarily a struggle, and so the native intelligence has not been sharpened by friction with the elements to the point that it readily distinguishes between good and evil. If it is easy to live in Egypt, it is also easy to die. A blessing is easily converted into a curse. The sun becomes hot and the peasant burrows into his damp, windowless mud hut to cool off; the breeze becomes cool and he wraps his head in a blanket to keep warm; the water brings fresh soil, but it is allowed to stand in puddles and breed harmful parasites; the populace think only of counting their blessings without trying to analyse their "kismet" when things go wrong. Tolerance is no virtue when it allows to go unchallenged an infant mortality rate of 29 percent under one year, a hookworm and bilharzia infection of over 70 percent of the population, practically universal trachoma, wide-

spread intestinal diseases, and a rapid victimization by venereal diseases and drugs. The water supply of the Egyptian village is chiefly the irrigation canals, which become seriously infected by sewage and by reason of being used for bathing by men and animals. The Egyptian peasant is a courteous, hospitable, kindly, lovable person, but he needs urgently to learn personal and public hygiene. Below is an account of an effort by the American University at Cairo to awaken public opinion on this subject.

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY AT CAIRO is an interdenominational Christian institution of higher learning, founded in 1920 and having at the present time four divisions; the American College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Oriental Studies, the Division of Extension, and the Department of Education. The department charged with the work of this experiment was the Division of Extension, known in Arabic as "the Division of Public Service." Since 1923, the Extension Division has conducted series of lectures, free to the public, on general scientific subjects but principally along health lines, with emphasis on sex education. Special moving picture films ("The Gift of Life" and, recently, "The Science of Life" series) are being widely exhibited both in Cairo and outside. For two years a Child Welfare Center in the Sayyida Zeinab quarter has been maintained. Literature in English and Arabic has been distributed. A few musical lectures and educational concerts have also been held in Cairo. The aim of the Division of Extension is to be the University's agent in serving the public to its utmost means along educational lines, elementary or advanced according to the most urgent need.

THE VILLAGE HEALTH CONTEST

I.

In 28 villages in nine out of Egypt's fourteen provinces, the gospel of personal and public health was preached during the months of June, July, and August, 1927, by 21 volunteer students of three Cairo schools, el Azhar University, the Qadis' School and Dar el Ulum. The work reached into every province of the Delta and three provinces of Upper Egypt. One hundred and fifty eight sermons on health were delivered in Mohammedan mosques and one hundred and seventy one public meetings were held. The texts chiefly were, "Swat the Fly," and "Drink from Wells, not Canals," but also "Hookworm," "Bilharzia" and "General Cleanliness" were used as themes. 35,308 persons heard the lessons and many were converted. The Division of Extension of the American University organized and carried out this experiment in an effort to discover whether the upper and student classes of the country could and would cooperate to improve health conditions in the villages.

The encouragements of two previous attempts at health propaganda by teachers and students of the American College of Arts and Sciences in 1922 and 1926, had suggested the possibility of calling for volunteers from other schools in the City. A friendly feeling between the University and certain schools already existed due to the lectures and pictures of the Extension Division, notably the higher classes of the famous old Moslem School of learning, El Azhar, the School of Qadis (Moslem Law School) and the Dar el Ulum (for training teachers of the Arabic language and literature), all of whom had been accustomed to an annual visit to see "The Gift of Life" film and listen to health lectures. At meetings held on April 26, 27, and May 4, 1927, for these students, lectures on the subject were given by Dr. Fakhry M. Farag, a contest was announced for the summer months and students were invited to participate. They were urged to use their

influence, which is strong, in their villages where they spend their long summer vacations, in behalf of good health for their fellow countrymen, the values of which they had learned during the lectures. Conditions governing the contest were clearly laid down and prizes were offered, £ 5. (\$ 25.) for the first and £ 3. and £ 2. for second and third places. Enrolment forms were distributed with samples of literature in Arabic on sex, flies, and drinking water and they were asked to consider the matter carefully and send in their names. The conditions were briefly as follows:

Prizes were to be awarded on the basis of reports submitted. Rhetoric and poetry, the passion of Arabic scholars, were not wanted, but rather concrete facts about work done. Each report was to cover definite points such as (1) number of meetings held, places and dates, names of hearers and owners of meeting places as far as possible; (2) number of discussions on health subjects with dates and places; (3) number of times, with dates and places, of sermons given in mosques; (4) information about population of the village, number of houses, pumps, ponds, schools, pupils and teachers; (5) incidents to show the attitude of the people towards this work; (6) estimate, with proofs, of the success of the student's efforts; (7) criticisms and recommendations regarding this contest. The last date for receiving reports was set for September 10, 1927.

Of the five hundred students who received this general invitation, 31 enrolled for the contest. During the summer, correspondence with these men was kept up and suggestions and literature sent them from time to time. In September, 21 reports were received by post or by personal delivery. Several contestants obviously came themselves in order to be assured that the contest was a fact and not a trick. One man frankly said that his friends laughed at his effort; for no doubt the Americans had already arranged that the prizes would be given to

themselves. (What sensible person with £ 10. in his hand would think of giving it away to strangers!) The same man made frequent calls, so eager was he to hear that a prize had been awarded to him.

II.

A committee of four able Egyptians was appointed to read and grade the reports. After each member individually had read every report and given it a grade, the committee held a meeting. The contestant with the highest total score won first place; second place was tied so that the prize was divided equally between two, each getting £ 1.50; third place was also a tie so that this prize had to be divided into two of £ 1. each; and then there being still a fifth man running very close, Dr. Fakhry himself kindly gave another pound. Thus in all we had six prizes. Great care was taken to weigh statements with regard to carelessness or intentional exaggeration or fraud. Inconsistency, vagueness, or inaccurate statistics were enough to condemn a report. The winner had a ring of sincerity and frankness which won general approval and the committee ascertained to its satisfaction that the work reported had actually been carried out. The successful contestants were:

First prize, £ 5, Abdel Aziz Mohammed el Hagrasy, Dar El Ulum.

Second prizes, £ 1.50 each, Abou Bakr Abdul Muttaleb, Qadis' School; Mohammed el Sayyed Ammar, Dar el Ulum.

Third prizes, £ 1 each, Abdel Aziz Amin, Dar el Ulum; Ahmed Gad Mousa, El Azhar.

Dr. Fakhry's prize, £ 1, Mohammed Mangood, El Azhar.

On October 21st, 1927, in the presence of 350 students of the three schools involved, and a number of specially invited notables, the prizes were presented, gold coins in jewelry boxes. Dr. Fakhry first reported on the contest as a whole and explained the purpose and ideal of the Division of Extension in conducting it. Dr. R.S. McClenahan, Dean of the

College of Arts and Sciences, then handed out the prizes beginning "from the least even unto the greatest." As el Hagrasy, the winner, stepped up to receive his five gold guineas, he was greeted by warm applause of an encouraging spontaneity.

III.

The winner of the first prize did his work in the small village of el Hagrasy in Sharqia Province, 66 miles north of Cairo. The population of this village is 2579 with 1672 others living on farms in the neighborhood. Although not himself a sheikh entitled to speak in the mosque, this student showed ingenuity in getting health subjects discussed in the places of prayer. To quote from his report:

"Friday, June 3rd, was the last Friday in Ramadan. I went to pray at the chief mosque of the village. After prayer the congregation dispersed quickly on account of the stuffy atmosphere inside. I managed however to hold a goodly number and asked them to listen to the circulars on water and flies. This took ten minutes. I noticed that they showed keen interest. Some of them asked 'Is it harmful then to drink any water other than filtered water and pump water?' I explained and they seemed satisfied. This first plunge and the success it received made me optimistic. This however was cut off by some 'Faqueehs' (blind chanters of Koran), who protested against talking on health subjects inside the mosque. They considered this as an interruption of the service and a heated argument followed. They accused me of not being a true Mohammedan, and that I was preparing the way for anti-Mohammedan propaganda, since these circulars were issued by a non-Islamic body. I had to be very patient and at the end succeeded in making a good number believe the importance of this work and its humanitarian object and was thus able to proceed without much resistance.

"On Friday, July 1st, I discussed ophthalmia and how to cure it. This was prevalent in the village on account of the ex-

treme hot weather. I pointed out the necessity of seeing an oculist at once, and that those who were poor could wash their eyes with a solution of boric acid and water and keep away from the bright sunlight. This pleased them immensely and they thanked me a lot and asked to have a similar lecture every week.

"Whenever any one felt a need he used to come and ask me about it, and I had to fall back on Wagdi's Encyclopedia for information.

"On July 15th when I felt that the public began to appreciate my work, I again read to a gathering the circular on water. When I read the article on the effect of pump water on sexual vitality, they all protested that pump water affected it adversely, and they would not believe the article in the circular that pump water was harmless. However, I told them that if they disbelieved they could drink from the zeer (filter).

"I had been up to now using the two mosques ~~or the village alternately~~. The imam of the big mosque is a young man who never barred me from using the mosque. The imam of the second mosque, however, is an ill-mannered reactionary who pretended he was religious when in fact he was not. Fortunately, however, he had ophthalmia in his eyes on July 22, so I got up and read a paper on cholera.

"On the feast day I was unable to speak as they were all in a hurry and I posted the two circulars ('Flies' and 'Drinking Water') on the mosque doors.

"I prepared a sermon on health and asked the imam to deliver it, because I wear western clothes which is not the right uniform for preachers in a mosque. He gave the sermon on two occasions and will probably use it again."

Regarding his efforts in the local schools, el Hagrasy writes. "I returned in the afternoon to reach the afternoon session since each section attends for half a day only. I attended the school about 14 times, each time talking on some health topics until their summer holidays commenced in July.

"I noticed the happy and quick results of the health instruction. The children spread the news amongst their parents and playmates, and would tell their mothers to cover food from flies and drink water from the pumps. I had occasion to hear this from some of the fathers. The headmaster and myself encouraged the boys with small presents of pencil pictures and colored chalk."

Other activities of this student included lecturing to 150 men in training for country night guards after their morning drill, discussions with small groups in his house, and hunting out those having hookworm and helping them get to the Government itinerant hospital four miles away.

A review of all the reports shows that favorite meeting places were the houses of the omdahs (headmen), houses of friends, the mosques and wayside praying places, the market places and fairs. Those who sought local cooperation were the most successful. The omdahs, school teachers, the Public Health doctors, the imams of the mosques, other students at home for the vacation, and especially the local Students' Committees (political organizations), committees of local notables specially organized, the village "barbers," or Health Department agents, and occasionally a member of Parliament or of a Municipal Council—all such contributed support for the cause. A useful method in case of a violent argument springing up, was to have a friend all ready to jump in as mediator with a strong leaning to the side of science.

As to means of getting the message firmly into the minds of the people, almost all testified to the value of sermons in the mosques. The atmosphere of religion lends authority to the health teaching and it is more readily accepted. Others stress the work with school children who are tremendous advocates among their own families; some used demonstrations, such as a microscope borrowed from a local pharmacy, or observation over a period of hours of glasses of canal and well water.

All encountered more or less opposition, some of it religious such as from bigoted sheikhs, but most of it from ignorance and superstition. Practically all mentioned the belief firmly held by the peasants that well water causes sexual impotence, while canal water will cure it. This belief seems to be very widely spread. A very strong reply to it is to ask them if the filtered water of Cairo or Alexandria causes the rich lords and ladies who live there to be weakened. Although they invariably have no answer to this, yet they stoutly maintain that they have seen enough cases of it in their own village to prove that well water is unhealthy. Other superstitions have to do with the way infection takes place. For example if one eye gets infected, the other gets infected through "smelling" the first. Because of such a belief it is very difficult to get them to understand the part that flies play in infection. Seeing is indeed believing with these people, for the conception of microbe does not seem possible unless seen under a microscope.

There are some real difficulties in the way of making clean water practicable. Most wells in villages are privately owned and so are not available for everybody, while canals and ponds are easily accessible. Further, men and women working in the fields some distance from their houses find it much easier to drink from the irrigation water than to carry clean water. Some villages use zeers (large earthen water pots) to filter the water. This practice should become more general.

IV.

In spite of some opposition and numerous difficulties, most of the contestants felt that real progress had been made. Numerous people were convinced of the evils of drinking unfiltered water, of going barefoot in regions where hookworm and bilharzia are rampant, of allowing accumulations of manure and filth in and around their houses, and of stagnant pools. Various testimonials from students show that people have also real-

ized the necessity of keeping children's faces clean and preventing flies from alighting on food. With regard to going barefoot (a practically universal custom among the fallaheen) one of the third prize winners tells of a preventive which he found in use in his neighborhood, viz. "mud slippers," made of the skin of goats or cows or camels. These protect the feet of those working in infected regions, since they prevent the entrance of the hookworm and bilharzia worm into the skin. If the use of such slippers or boots could be made more nearly universal, the ravages of hookworm and bilharzia might soon be terminated.

V.

This contest stimulated a good deal of public interest. Practically all of the Cairo Arabic dailies carried reports of the work and several published the photograph of the winners. Two leading dailies, the Mokattam and the Siasa, each carried leading editorials in their issues of Oct. 27. The Siasa's article was entitled

"Our Schools and Character Education Egyptian Schools Teach but do not Educate."

After mentioning at considerable length the need of wholesome, live projects for students of Government schools to engage in, the Siasa goes on to say, "Our aim is not to blame but to urge our people to follow the example of nations already civilized. We need not go far to seek for an example; we may simply call attention to the activities displayed by the American University in our midst. In our news columns of yesterday we mentioned the ceremony organized by the Division of Extension of the University for the distribution of prizes to the winners from the students of the Azhar, Dar el Ulum, and Qada' el Shar'i for the spread of health propaganda in their villages... The American University, as many other foreign schools, is fully able to train their students from the character side and to

endow them with a strong character education, which the various Egyptian schools have been unable to realize to date among their students. We mentioned yesterday the concern of the American University about the question of lectures and the construction of an Auditorium which has no equal in Egypt and we said also that the Division of Extension of this University would render a great service to the Egyptian public... We have given a short resume of the Extension activities in connection with health propaganda in Egyptian villages. From this we feel that the American University does not aim only at having its students educated but strives also to make them men of action, longing for this country's welfare and ever working to realize it."

The Mokattam editorial was headed as follows:

**"Social Reform in Egypt.
Cooperation Expected from Educated
Young Men.**

Example given by the Division of Extension of the American University."

After mentioning the need of directing the energies of the educated toward doing something for the overwhelming majority of the population who are not educated, the editorial goes on to say, "The people, even though of different creeds, religions, races, and languages, yet are closely bound by certain connections. Why should we not use this force in solving the problem of social reform.

"That is what the American University at Cairo has comprehended when it follows the system already applied in the new world where universities consecrate large blocks of their power, finance and knowledge for reform.

"The American University at Cairo decided to ask the help of the educated youth. They did not limit the campaign to their own students but extended the invitation to all who cared for this work among the educated young men within reach. The Mokattam has had opportunity, more than once, to publish news

about the trips made by these young men to the villages, and the conversations which took place between them and the villagers about health preservation, the advantage of cleanliness, and the necessity of purifying drinking water; and explained the apparent change in the village life where these social demonstrations took place.

"Then the American University began to conduct the project on a wider basis, the result of which was contained in the reports which the Division of Extension distributed to the press and which Al Mokattam published two days ago....

"We understand from those who have been organizing this propaganda that it was warmly welcomed by the educated young men who participated in it with such promising activity and whose zeal has helped them to extend the work by winning other workers. They deserve the thanks of the country and praise of all who care for the good of Egypt. They have pointed the way to use a great force for the public interest, without making much clamour or expense.

"Now since the experiment has proved very useful, we would like to suggest that our schools apply this method, study it and train their students or a certain group of them to carry out this much appreciated work. By doing so we will prepare thousands of reformers for Egypt who would grow up with the habit of appreciating and acting for reform. Those who know the conditions in the Egyptian villages, and how much they need to be reformed and improved, can understand the value of such a project. If we keep quiet after what we have explained, we will be neglecting a national duty. So let us make use of this great factor and cooperate with this concealed force to serve our country and the public."

VI.

This experiment seems to have brought out certain facts:

1.—That there is a large body of students who, with no occupation during their summer vacations, feel that there is here a dignified opportunity for them to be of real service and to extend what knowledge they have to those who do not have it.

2.—The people in the villages seem to appreciate this interest, particularly if they are afflicted and are looking for a cure.

3.—Public opinion in Egypt seems to be ripe for some such general movement as this and would very heartily support an effort to preach health throughout the country.

4.—Given good leadership, a large movement might be inaugurated which would educate the public on a few points fundamental to personal and public health. Proportionate to the amount of good accomplished, the expense is practically nothing, involving only a little money for prizes, literature and correspondence. Not only is it to be hoped that the Division of Extension may try the experiment again on a larger scale in the summer of 1928, but it is also desirable that other schools should try some similar activity, and that the Department of Public Health and the Ministry of Education should encourage and promote movement.

